

## **Selleck's Woods Deer Hunt/Cull Final Report**

By unanimous decision by the governing bodies, parties and hunters themselves, the hunt was suspended on January 4<sup>th</sup> and formally ended on January 11, 2006. At the conclusion of the hunt, an experienced team of bow hunters had taken three adult breeding doe deer. No deer were wounded and lost. No arrows were lost or unaccounted for. No accidents or injuries occurred.

Numerous factors were considered before setting a goal of twelve deer as the goal for the initial harvest of the Selleck's/Dunlap Woods location. The location was judged to be roughly a tenth to a twentieth of a square mile. The much-debated figure of deer-per-square-mile was considered. The previous sightings by frequent users of the park as well as nearby residents were yet another factor. Density of deer sign (tracks, droppings, beds, rubs, scrapes) discovered in late summer and early fall scouting trips were considered. **Every single one of these parameters changed before the hunt took place.** The hunt area was cut in half by the exclusion of Dunlap Woods for insurance reasons. The hunt was delayed, resulting in fewer weeks to hunt, a change of deer movement patterns, vanishing ground cover, natural deer food supply and resulting deer sign.

The first week of the hunt incurred daily disruption by a lady walking her Dalmatian in violation of the conspicuous signage. This resulted in two detrimental effects. It disrupted the hunting episodes on the days it occurred and diminished my hunter's enthusiasm. After all, we had an elite team of experienced effective men volunteering to help with the deer problem at their own expense and on their own time. Furthermore, each and every man had to curtail or ignore hunting opportunities elsewhere in order to participate in the Selleck's Woods hunt, only to have their efforts trashed by an interloper. It took authorities several days to identify and notify the dog-walker of the ramifications of her activities and the interruption ceased. The hunters also endured two days of single-digit temperatures.

The second week of the hunt encompassed the Christmas holiday. Naturally, family activities and commitments reduced our availability to hunt and as a result, we logged the fewest hours in the woods of any of the three weeks. Paradoxically, we harvested two of the hunts three deer that week. We observed our bait sites being consumed by nocturnal deer activity.

The third week of the hunt saw as many hunter-hours as the first week, perhaps as a result of renewed enthusiasm. But deer sightings during hunting hours were still sparse, reinforcing the theory that the deer in Selleck's Woods were actively there late in the day and at night. Deer tracks around our bait sites, timed and dated photos on my motion-sensing digital deer camera and late day deer sightings by neighborhood hunter, Malcom Brown confirmed this. The third deer was taken in unlikely conditions, during a Nor-Easter.

By Rob Lucas, Master of the Hunt, January 19, 2006

In the face of a diminishing return for our hunting efforts and the frustration of

knowing that the deer were at our hunting sites when we were not permitted to hunt, I recommended the one-week moratorium and eventual termination of the hunt.

What did we learn from this endeavor?

All deer hunting (not just in Selleck's Woods) is most successful in November. The local meat-cutter who processes deer for hunters in our area, confirms this. In 2005 he processed 190 deer from September 15 to December 31. One hundred of them were from November while the remaining 90 were from September, October and December combined. Similar controlled hunts in Easton, Greenwich and Wilton show the same bell-shaped curve with the peak in November with nearly the same breakdown. The biggest factor in this phenomenon is the Whitetail rut, or breeding season which makes deer much more active during this time. This phenomenon is also responsible for more deer-vehicle collisions during this period. In this special hunt, we were denied the advantage of hunting "the rut" due to a December 14<sup>th</sup> start date.

Hunting requires versatility. In our proposal, we designed a hunt that would only occur in the morning, every morning. But the deer didn't cooperate. Their daytime beds were located elsewhere, on private property around the park. The deer did return late in the day but that was of no good to us, as the park was open at that time for other uses and closed to hunting. If we could have, we would alter our hunting habits to adapt but that would require a new proposal to the committees, new signs, more expense and so on.

Hunting works. We had assigned a goal of twelve and planned to hunt on 50 acres of woodland from November 1<sup>st</sup> until we reached that goal or the season ended, whichever came first. We lost half our hunting area and we still harvested three deer in a very patchy three weeks during which we endured single digit temperatures, interference by an intruder and a holiday period. If we toughed it out for three more weeks and took three more deer, that would total half of the goal from half the hunting area, which figures. I am certain that we would have half as much trouble of reaching our goal if we were permitted to hunt earlier in the season and use the entire day, two days a week.

Statistically, several findings were revealed but were no surprise. Our performance was similar to other hunts in the area and hunting in general. Fifteen hunter man-hours were required for each deer taken. Twenty-five deer were seen, only one (4%) were antlered and 96% were antlerless. One hundred percent of the deer shot at were hit and killed and recovered quickly. The average distance a deer traveled before dying was fifty yards. All three harvested deer were adult age does. All of the meat was donated to charity including Person to Person in Darien. The accident, wounding, lost arrow and injury rate was zero. No coyotes or foxes were spotted.

This hunt was conceived of because of clear and abundant evidence of overpopulated deer and the resulting destruction of a cherished and valuable habitat in Darien. The removal of three adult doe deer results in six fewer deer being born next spring. The exponential growth of the herd should have been addressed long ago, but it is a good thing it is finally being done. It was not done perfectly this time around, and

improvements can be made. Others and I are willing to make them.

It would be a myopic view indeed, to not consider the harvest of three doe deer significant and successful. Should this program not be continued for political or any other reason, it would be to the severe detriment of our woodland habitats. I am not alone in this opinion, for it was the father of modern conservation, Aldo Leopold who said: ***“Just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. And perhaps with better cause, for while a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years, a range pulled down by too many deer may fail of replacement in as many decades.”***